

The “Sullivan” Keys Make a Comeback

By Kent Sprecher

To those of us active in collecting switch keys during the 1980's, it seemed as if there were just as many imitation keys out there as there were genuine keys to be found. One prolific dealer of keys with non-original railroad markings was Mr. Paul Harshman of Sullivan, Illinois. He has been estimated to have cranked out at least 2,000 to 3,000 of these keys, if not more.

In August of 1969, Mr. Harshman and his wife opened an antique, gift, and ice cream shop in the old C&EI railroad station in Sullivan. According to a June, 1971 article in the *Decatur Daily Review*, former railroad employees and local residents enjoyed visiting “The Depot” and browsing through the railroadiana and other memorabilia on display there. At some point during the 1970's, he began offering switch keys for sale.

As is often the case with keys bearing added railroad markings, many of the so-called “Sullivan” keys undoubtedly utilized genuine blank keys or factory



A group of keys that are considered to be reproductions or have added markings seem to mostly be early “Sullivans” with the odd junction of the barrel & bow as a dead giveaway.

overruns, but Mr. Harshman evidently had the ability to make his own keys, as well. He gradually got better with making the reproductions as he went along, and eventually acquired or had hallmark dies made for the following manufacturers: Adams & Westlake (A&W hex & A&W oval), ADLAKE (curved), ADLAKE (straight), Wilson Bohannon, Handlan-Buck, MM Buck, Fraim (keystone), Fraim (banner), and probably others as well.

One collector from Illinois described several meetings with the “Sullivan” key man in the 1980's:

When I went to visit Mr. Harshman, I was shown four or five large boards with many keys duplicated. I would roughly guess that there were over five hundred keys (at least) on those boards, possible many more.

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Reproduction Report



A group of switch keys from the Illinois collector whose account of visiting the Sullivan station is related in this article. All were purchased directly from Mr. Paul Harshman after his "Depot" antique shop and museum had closed. A discussion of the authenticity of each individual key appears in the article. All photos courtesy of Kent Sprecher.



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Mr. Harshman had purchased the former Chicago & Eastern Illinois Railroad depot in Sullivan, IL and had it moved on to a piece of property several miles from his home. He had turned it into museum of sorts. This museum was closed and out of business when I first saw it.

It had a set of original Illinois Central Railroad train order boards on their original mast in front. I was able to purchase those order boards, only I had to go up on the mast to take them down. They were very heavy. During a subsequent visit, I saw the original C&EI order boards out on the entrance way, mostly obscured by trees that had overgrown them.

I was able to get those boards too, but I had to pay someone to get them down for me. I also bought an original C&EI wooden train board, and was able to remove and purchase the original levers that actuated the movement of the order boards, plus some other things that I cannot remember.

I must have bought from thirty five to forty keys at a cost of around \$300. I don't know how many keys he sold over the years from his museum, but there could be a lot out there in the hands of collectors and non-collectors. All of the keys I bought look funky to me, and I have seen a few at past railroading shows that have fooled some collectors.

“Sullivan” Reproduction Switch Key Identification Checklist

- Barrel/Bow connection is bulbous, crude or not symmetrical.
- Front & back barrel/bow connections do not match.
- Depth of railroad name marking is consistent with that of a new key that has not seen use.
- Edges of cuts on bit are not worn in a manner that shows use, but are rounded by a rock tumbler.
- Recessed cuts may appear shiny.
- Some keys show discoloration from chemical aging.
- Markings on Adlake keys have an unusual ampersand which is different from originals.
- Note that not all of these features appear on every reproduction key.



Examples of two identical reproduction keys, which are believed to have been produced by Paul Harshman in Sullivan, IL. See next page for markings on the reverse.

The “Sullivan” keys usually have characteristics that with practice can help collectors recognize what they are and avoid buying them (or at least make an informed purchase). First is that the connection where the barrel meets the bow is bulbous or crude and is not symmetrical on both sides of that connection. Nor does the connection look the same on both sides of the key, as it should. Also, the depth of the markings are consistent with a new, unused key and not one that had seen use and is worn.

On “Sullivan” keys, the edges of the individual cuts on the bit are rounded where they should be somewhat sharp, indicating the key was placed in a rock tumbler. Recessed cuts are often shiny as well, and the keys may be discolored from chemicals used to simulate age. Finally, the early A&W/Adlake repros use an odd ampersand (“&”) that is easy to tell from the one found on genuine switch keys.

A few of the keys purchased by the Illinois collector directly from Mr. Harshman are pictured on the previous page. All of the Adams & Westlake (A&W) and “Adlake” marked keys are considered to be reproductions, as are the three Bohannans. Then it gets interesting.

The initial consensus among several experienced collectors was that the ESTL&SRY key was genuine. However, further discussion of this assessment with the collector who had originally bought the key in the Sullivan depot revealed a previously unknown fact: he had purchased two identical keys! The ESTL&SRY appears to be an example of the keys that were completely reproduced by Mr. Harshman (as opposed to added markings on an original key).

Reviewing the other reproductions, note that the two Handlan-Buck hallmarks are different and that the RI&MRR key has that “Sullivan” look. The key with the JL Howard hallmark is different from several known examples of authentic keys and is also likely a “Sullivan.” The last key - the GPRY with the F-S HDW Co hallmark - may just be a marked up overrun.

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Another collector recalls running into Mr. Harshman at a flea market and observing that he had “four or five buckets full of keys.” From these various accounts, it is evident that “Sullivan” keys were produced in large quantities and have likely ended up in many collections. It is unknown when Paul Harshman stopped making his reproduction keys, but it appears that he passed away in 2003.

How many of the keys that were sold in the Sullivan Depot over the years were original with authentic markings, and how many were reproductions is unknown today. Now that a number of older collectors are aging out of the hobby, collections are coming onto the market that contain some of these keys. In recent months, they have surfaced at shows, estate sales, and online auctions, often unknowingly grouped with authentic keys. So look closely and buyer beware!

At right are two switch keys marked ESTL&SRY, that were purchased from Paul Harshman of Sullivan, IL. While they were initially identified as original by several experienced collectors, the discovery of two identical examples flags them as reproductions. Yes, these are two different keys!



The Dilemma of Souvenirs & Reproductions

By David Hamilton

It is probably safe to say that most members of Key, Lock & Lantern collect railroadiana as a physical connection to the history of the railroad industry. When we purchase switch keys, lanterns, or timetables, we want them to be authentic artifacts that actually saw use on the railroad. Reproductions, souvenirs, and decorative items are nice, but we want the “real deal.”

However, a large number of participants in the general railroad hobby are completely happy with reproductions. They want railroad logo signs for the train room wall, lanterns that don’t require cleaning, and ready-framed collections of uniform buttons. Original memorabilia is sometimes preferred, if it is available at a reasonable price, but authenticity is usually not an important factor.

As long as this market exists, reproductions and fantasy items will continue to be produced, and it is impractical (and perhaps unreasonable) for collectors to attempt to prevent it. There is even a benefit to having reproductions available - wouldn’t it be disturbing to be outbid at an auction for an original sign, only to later discover it mounted with screws through its face to the wall of a local railroad-theme restaurant. And every one of those newly produced 1980’s Handlan switch lamps that were made into table lamps spared an original from the same fate.

Then there is the need for hardware and fixtures in restored depots and rolling stock. It would certainly be a gamble to hang an original Western Union sign on the exterior of a tourist railroad station. And, believe it or not, I once worked on a shortline that still used Erie Railroad locks.

Movie props that were made to look like original equipment can also find their way into circulation (imagine being a collector of nautical antiques following the *Titanic* movie!). One of our members makes reproduction Civil War uniforms

and equipment for use by reenactors, since you really wouldn’t want to bring originals into a mock battle. Then there are the many replacement parts for lanterns and other hardware, often produced by collectors themselves. There is in fact a need for reproductions, even among those of us who primarily collect original antiques.

However, the existence of so many reproductions, fantasy pieces, and souvenirs also creates a dilemma for collectors of authentic memorabilia. We would like to be able to attend a show, knowing that we are purchasing authentic artifacts, but these are often the same venues where reproductions are sold. And when a collection is disposed of, everything is usually lumped together in the auction. The only real solution to this problem is education.

If known reproductions are documented in the *Key, Lock & Lantern* magazine, this information will be available to current and future collectors. Too often, knowledge of reproductions is simply passed between collectors by word of mouth, leaving those who weren’t present in the dark. Until I received the preceding article, I had never heard of the “Sullivan” keys in 30+ years of collecting! And the reproduction Long Island RR timetables featured in the last issue were unknown to many serious collectors for decades.

While the existence of reproductions presents a challenge to collectors, it is only wrong (and sometimes illegal) for someone to knowingly misrepresent them as original. All that we can do is to create a permanent record of their existence and share that information with others. I would like to invite those dealers who sell reproductions (or have done so in the past) to provide information about their products to Key, Lock & Lantern, and I encourage KL&L members to continue sending in reports. By doing so, we can make the railroad hobby better for everyone.